

Kunstkritikk

Norton, Nicholas: Centre of Attention. Ida Ekblad's paintings do not comment on visual culture, they produce it.
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Centre of Attention

Ida Ekblad's paintings do not comment on visual culture, they produce it.

By Nicholas Norton 18.06.21 Review [Artikkel på norsk](#)



Ida Ekblad, *Girl Fires Up Stove*, 2021.
Installation view, Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo.
Courtesy of the artist and Kunstnernes Hus.
Photo: Vegard Kleven.

In Ida Ekblad's exhibition *Girl Fires Up Stove* at Kunstnernes Hus, the sky-lit gallery overflows with paintings, fifty-five in total. Pictures in monumental formats – many comprising joined canvases – fill my field of vision in whichever direction I look, with smaller pictures placed higher up on the wall in a salon-style hang. The effect is overwhelming and difficult to take in, a stream of impressions whose layout and content is reminiscent of an image search, colours and patterns reused in various combinations and divided up again and again.

Girl Fires Up Stove

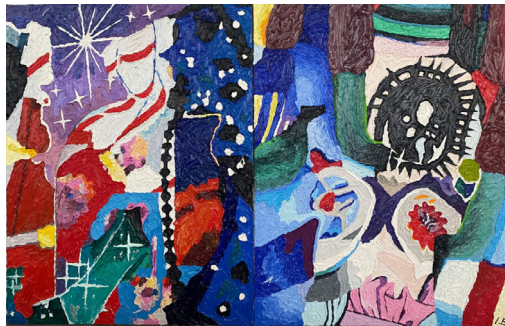
Ida Ekblad

**Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo
4 June — 8 August 2021**

As in her show at Peder Lund earlier this year, Ekblad combines fragments of manga-character faces, stars, flowers and

decorative patterns (graffiti, nets, calligraphy, Fauvist interiors, and more). Contours are emphasised rather than complete figures, and the fragmented motifs look like they have been haphazardly enlarged via the pinch-to-zoom gesture on a touchscreen. Energetic vortices done in thick and deep brushstrokes make it look as if the paint was smeared on, creating small ridges and tips where the paint has pushed up between brush traces. In the most active paintings, such as *Nurse Won't Give Me a Glass* (2020), dense bands of contrasting patterns merge to kaleidoscopic effect and create an impression of aesthetic insatiability. Another similarity with images on screens concerns the *immediacy* of these paintings. They do not require much cognitive effort from the viewer in order to yield dividends, yet they do not deter such investment.

Ekblad's first exhibition following her graduation from The Academy of Fine Art in Oslo, *Silver Ruins* at Fotogalleriet in 2008, included photo collages depicting basketball shoes and the rap legend Eazy-E, works that showed the commodification of subculture. Her interest in the semiotics of subculture mirrored other leading Norwegian artists at the time such as Matias Faldbakken and Gardar Eide Einarsson. In Ekblad's first museum exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art in 2013, her appropriation of pop-cultural images had been shelved in favour of paintings and sculptures that incorporate the aesthetics and strategies of the historical avant-garde. Shopping carts filled with scrap metal had poems carved into their wheels, evoking Charles Baudelaire's comparison of poets and ragpickers, both defined as figures who find their material among the relics and refuse of culture. Reuse was also characteristic for paintings born out of the stylistic repertoire of Asger Jorn and the CoBrA group.



Ida Ekblad, *Nurse Won't Give Me a Glass*, 2020. Oil on canvas, artist's frame, 185 x 285 cm. Courtesy the artist and Peder Lund. Photo: Uli Holz.

A step-by-step progression is discernible here, from

appropriation art that points to the commercialisation of visual culture to a more process-oriented and poetic approach that reanimates the assemblages of the post-war avant-garde, and now onwards to Ekblad's 2021 style of painting in which the impasto gestures of CoBrA painting enter into a dialogue with frictionless screen interfaces. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook loop together feeds with reams of pictures based on the user's interests. Ekblad's paintings take a similar approach, producing a personal expression of style based on those parts of visual culture in which she appears to be particularly interested: fashion, club culture, art history, interiors, and more. As with the feed, the imperative is not so much to encourage critical insight as to grasp and hold our attention.

In *The Interface Effect* (Polity, 2012), media theorist Alexander R. Galloway writes about how the interface is not a thing, but a process or translation, an active threshold between different states that often hides more than it shows. The link between the source of Google's page ranking algorithm and the user interface you see in your browser is at best opaque. Similarly, the statistics Instagram collects about which images we pay attention to are not visible to users. Nor, indeed, is the relationship between these statistics and their effect on the order in which images appear in the interface. The white web patterns found in several of Ekblad's images, including *Metal Mother / Cloth Mother* (2021), resemble fishing nets or crocheted tablecloths, and are reminders of how interfaces merge images from across different styles and interests into aggregates that we find arresting without knowing what brought them together.



Ida Ekblad, *The Real Flesh-Eater*, 2021. Oil on canvas, artist's frame, 160 x 125 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Peder Lund. Photo: Uli Holz.

In the second gallery, Ekblad shows a series of seven sculptures based on neoclassical wood stoves from the beginning of the 20th century. Their shapes are identical, but the decor varies: some carry simple portraits, others decorative elements such as Greek key designs, text fragments (“strange freedom”, “berserk”), graffiti elements, and symbols taken from folk art. The stove sculptures nod towards the serial anti-ornamental objects made by Minimalists such as Donald Judd and Carl Andre and to the even more pared-back return of such industrial fetishism in the work of many artists of Ekblad’s generation (Oscar Tuazon or Klara Lidén, for example). Importantly, these works fit into a general interest in the decorative as a carrier of identity and culture in contemporary art. To my mind, the renewed interest in the decorative among artists such as Than Hussein Clark, Martin Sæther, and Mikael Brkic relates to the fact that aesthetic hierarchies tend to mirror hierarchies found elsewhere in society.

The decorative has long belonged to the ‘lower’ aesthetic strata because the decorative arts (and professions) have been the domain of women, queer people, and Indigenous Peoples.

My description of Ekblad’s paintings as an interface is also prompted by how her paintings not only arrange and order visual culture, but also produce it. As sad as it may be to some, today platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and 4chan generate and constantly renew visual culture to a far greater degree than contemporary art. Ekblad’s painting reclaims some of art’s lost involvement, but without claiming art as essentially different from other types of aesthetic production. These paintings exist in relation to the various popular cultural phenomena she seems interested in – club culture, music, and fashion – not so much as commentary, but in mutual exchange. Tellingly, the gallery she runs in Oslo, Schloss, has morphed into an engine for tee shirt designs and club releases – available to buy in the foyer of Kunstneres Hus. This productive involvement in the here and now of culture sets Ekblad’s paintings apart from the majority of her fellow Norwegian artists. Consider, for example, Marit Slaattelid’s pictures, which occupied Kunstneres Hus around this time last year: for all their pictorial qualities and sublime presence, they appear cooler, more calculated, as if self-consciously concerned with their placement in the grand media-specific narrative of painting. Perhaps this carefree contemporaneity – and the fact that the grand narrative of painting has been set aside – is the reason why Ekblad’s paintings come across as so frictionlessly engaging.



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